FOXEN IN THE HENHICE

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Recently I undertook an extensive study of American dialects, and a friend told me of a farmer named Eben Pluribus who spoke a most unusual kind of English. So I went to visit Farmer Pluribus, and here is a transcript of our interview:

"Mr. Pluribus, I hear that you've had some trouble on the farm."

"Well, young fella, times was hard for a spell. Them danged foxen was raiding my henhouse."

"Excuse me, sir," I interjected. "Don't you mean foxes?"

"No, I don't," Pluribus replied. "I plow my fields with oxen, so it's foxen that I'm trying to get rid of."

"I see, but what are henhouses?" I asked.

"Easy. One mouse, two mice; one henhouse, two henhouses. You must be one of them city slickers, but surely you know that henhouses are what them birds live in that, when they're little critters, they utter all them peep."

"I think I'm beginning to understand you, Mr. Pluribus. But don't you mean peeps?"

"Nope, I mean peep. More than one sheep is a flock of sheep, and more than one peep is a bunch of peep. What do you think I am, one of them old ceet?"

"I haven't meant to insult you, sir," I gulped. "But I can't quite make out what you're saying."

"Then you must be a touch slow in the head," snapped Farmer Pluribus. "One foot, two feet; one coot, two ceets. I'm just trying to easify the English language, so I make all regular plural nouns irregular. Once they're all irregular, then it's just the same like they're all regular."

"Makes perfect sense to me," I mumbled.

"Good boy," said Pluribus, and a gleam came into his eyes. "Now, as I was saying, them pesky foxen made such a fuss that all the meese and lynges have gone north."

"Aha!" I shouted. "You don't mean Ed Meese and his family. You're talking about those big, antlered animals, aren't you? One goose, a gaggle of geese; one moose, a herd of meese. And lynges is truly elegant - one sphinx, a lineup of sphinges; one lynx, a litter of lynges."
"You're a smart fella, sonny," smiled Pluribus. "You see, I used to think that my cose might scare away them foxen, but the cose were too busy chasing rose."

"Oh, oh. You've lost me again," I lamented. "What are cose and rose?"

"Guess you ain't so smart after all," Pluribus sneered. "If those is the plural of that, then cose and rose got to be the plurals of cat and rat."

"Sorry I'm so thick, but I'm really not one of those people who talk through their hose," I apologized, picking up Pluribus's cue. "Could you please tell me what happened to the foxen in your henhouse?"

"I'd be pleased to," answered Pluribus. "What happened was that my brave wife, Una Pluribus, grabbed one of them frying pen and took off after the foxen."

I wondered for a moment what frying pen were and then realized that because the plural of man is men, the plural of pen must be pen.

"Well," Farmer Pluribus went right on talking, "the missus weren't able to catch them foxen, so she couldn't bop them with them pen. But she went right back to the kitchen and began throwing dish at them foxen."

That one stumped me for a time, until I realized that a school of fish is made up of fish so that Mrs. Pluribus must have grabbed a stack of dish.

Pluribus never stopped. "Them dish sure scarified them foxen, and the critters aren't never come back. In fact, the rest of the village heard about what my wife did, and they were so proud that they sent the town band out to the farm to serenade her with tubae, harmonicae, accordia, fives, and dra."

"Hold up!" I gasped. "Give me a minute to figure out those musical instruments. The plural of formula is formulae, so the plurals of tuba and harmonica must be tubae and harmonicae. And the plurals of phenomenon and criterion are phenomena and criteria, so the plural of accordion must be accordia."

"You must be one of them genii," Pluribus exclaimed.

"Maybe," I blushed. "One cactus, two cacti; one alumnus, an association of alumni. So one genius, a bunch of genii. But let me get back to those instruments. The plurals of life and wife are lives and wives, so the plural of fife must be fives. And the plural of medium is media, so the plural of drum must be dra. Whew! That last one was tough."

"Good boy, sonny. Well, my wife done such a good job of chasing away them foxen that the town newspaper printed up a story and ran a couple of photographim of her holding them pen and dish."
My brain was now spinning in high gear, so it took me but an instant to perceive that Farmer Pluribus had regularized one of the most exotic plurals in the English language – seraph, seraphim; so photograph, photographim. I could imagine all the Pluribus bathing in their bath tubim, as in cherub, cherubim; bath tub, bath tubim.

"Well," crowed Pluribus. "I was pleased as punch that everybody was so nice to the missus, but that ain't no surprise since folks in these here parts show a lot of respect for their methren."

"Brother, brethren; mother, methren," I rejoined. "That thought makes me want to cry. Have you any boxen of Kleeniees here?"

"Sure do, young fella. And I'm tickled pink that you've caught on to the way I've easified the English language. One index, two indices and one appendix, two appendices. So one Kleenex, two Kleeniees. Makes things simpler, don't it?"

I was so grateful to Farmer Pluribus for having taught me his unique dialect that I took him out to one of the local careteriae. Then I reported my findings to Word Ways by calling from one of the local telephone beeth.

Yep, you've got it. One tooth, two teeth. One telephone booth, two telephone beeth. Makes things simpler, don't it?

NAMES AND NICKNAMES OF PLACES AND THINGS

This is the title of an onomastics book by Laurence Urdang, published for $39.95 in 1987 by G.K. Hall. Its 1500 entries range from brief notes (Little Rhody: the official nickname of Rhode Island) to informative essays of a page or more (Fire Island, Broadway, Manhattan, Orient Express, etc.). The overwhelming majority of the entries, perhaps 90 per cent, relate to places instead of things. The author (or his contributors) displays a marked partiality for place names in the Greater London area: for example, for the letters B, M, and T there are 48 such items, compared with 44 for the rest of the British Isles, and only 65 for the remainder of the world (excluding the United States). The writing is often lively ("...Manhattan neighborhoods so deserted at night that even the rats went uptown," "in its heyday a flourish of about 2000 strumpets...plied their profession there," "a comfortable plasticized commuterland...interspersed with patches of mild scenery"), and the book is a pleasure to browse in.